The Secret Sense

Isaac Asimov

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The Martians couldn't taste and their hearing was bad, but they had a secret sense all of their own.

THE LILTING strains of a Strauss waltz filled the room. The music waxed and waned beneath the sensitive fingers of Lincoln Fields, and through half-closed eyes he could almost see whirling figures pirouetting about the waxed floor of some luxurious salon.

Music always affected him that way. It filled his mind with dreams of sheer beauty and transformed his room into a paradise of sound. His hands flickered over the piano in the last delicious combinations of tones and then slowed reluctantly to a halt.

He sighed and for a moment remained absolutely silent as if trying to extract the last essence of beauty from the dying echoes. Then he turned and smiled faintly at the other occupant of the room.

Garth Jan smiled in turn but said nothing. Garth had a great liking for Lincoln Fields, though little understanding. They were worlds apart-literally-for Garth hailed from the giant underground cities of Mars while Fields was the product of sprawling Terrestrial New York.

"How was that, Garth, old fellow?" questioned Fields doubtfully.

Garth shook his head. He spoke in his precise, painstaking manner, "I listened attentively and can truly say that it was not unpleasant. There is a certain rhythm, a cadence of sorts, which, indeed, is rather soothing. But beautiful?

No!"

There was pity in Fields' eyes-pity almost painful in its intensity. The Martian met the gaze and understood all that it meant, yet there was no answering spark of envy. His bony giant figure remained doubled up in a chair that was too small for him and one thin leg swung leisurely back and forth.

Fields lunged out of his seat impetuously and grasped his companion by the arm.

"Here! Seat yourself on the bench."

Garth obeyed genially. "I see you want to carry out some little

experiment."

"You've guessed it. I've read scientific works which tried to explain all about the difference in senseequipment between Earthman and Martian, but I never could quite grasp it all."

He tapped the notes C and F in a single octave and glanced at the Martian inquiringly.

"If there's a difference," said Garth doubtfully, "it's a very slight one. If I were listening casually, I would certainly say you had hit the same note twice."

The Earthman marvelled. "How's this?" He tapped C and G.

"I can hear the difference this time."

"Well, I suppose all they say about your people is true. You poor fellows yto have such a crude sense of hearing. You don't know what you're missing."

The Martian shrugged his shoulders fatalistically. "One misses nothing that one has never possessed."

Garth Jan broke the short silence that followed. "Do you realize that this period of history is the first in which two intelligent races have been able to communicate with each other? The comparison of sense equipment is highly interesting-and rather broadens one's views on life."

"That's right," agreed the Earthman, "though we seem to have all the advantage of the comparison. You know a Terrestrial biologist stated last month that he was amazed that a race so poorly equipped in the matter of sense-perception could develop so high a civilization as yours."

"All is relative, Lincoln. What we have is sufficient for us."

Fields felt a growing frustration within him. "But if you only knew, Garth, if you only knew what you were missing.

"You've never seen the beauties of a sunset or of dancing flelds of flowers. You can't admire the blue of the sky, the green of the grass, the yellow of ripe corn. To you the world consists of shades of dark and light." He shuddered at the thought. "You can't smell a flower or appreciate its delicate perfume. You can't even enjoy such a simple thing as a good, hearty meal. You can't taste nor smell nor see color. I pity you for your drab world."

"What you say is meaningless, Lincoln. Waste no pity on me, for I am as happy as you." He rose and reached for his cane-necessary in the greater gravitational field of Earth.

"You must not judge us with such easy superiority, you know." That seemed to be the galling aspect of the matter. "We do not boast of certain accomplishments of our race of which you know nothing."

And then, as if heartily regretting his words, a wry grimace overspread his face, and he started for he door.

FIELDS sat puzzled and thoughtful for a moment, then jumped up and ran after the Martian who was stumping his way towards the exit. He gripped Garth by the shoulder and insisted that he return.

"What did you mean by that last remark?"

The Martian turned his face away as if unable to face his questioner. "Forget it, Lincoln. That was just a moment of indiscretion when your unsolicited pity got on my nerves."

Fields gave him a sharp glance. "It's true, isn't it? It's logical that Martians possess senses Earthmen do not, but it passes the bounds of reason that your people should want to keep it secret."

"That is as it may be. But now that you've found me out through my own utter stupidity, you will perhaps agree to let it go no further?"

"Of course! I'll be as secret as the grave, though I'm darned if I can make anything of it. Tell me, of what nature is this secret sense of yours?"

Garth Jan shrugged listlessly. "How can I explain? Can you define color to me, who cannot even conceive it?"

"I'm not asking for a definition. Tell me its uses. Please," he gripped the other's shoulder, "you might as well. I have given my promise of secrecy."

The Martian sighed heavily. "It won't do you much good. Would it satisfy you to know that if you were to show me two containers, each filled with a clear liquid, I could tell you at once whether either of the two were poisonous? Or, if you were to show me a copper wire, I could tell instantly whether an electric current were passing through it, even if it were as little as a thousandth of an ampere. Or I could tell you the temperature of any substance within three degrees of the true vaalue even π if you held it as much as five yards away. Or I could-well, I've said enough."

"Is that all?" demanded Fields, with a disappointed cry.

"What more do you wish?"

"All you've described is very useful-but where is the beauty in it? Has this strange sense of yours no value to the spirit as well as to the body?"

Garth Jan made an impatient movement. "Really, Lincoln, you talk foolishly. I have given you only that for which you asked-the uses I put this sense to. I certainly didn't attempt to explain its nature. Take your color sense. As far as I can see its only use is in making certain fine distinctions which I cannot.

You can identify certain chemical solutions, for instance, by something you call color when I would be forced to run a chemical analysis. Where's the beauty in that?"

Field opened his mouth to speak but the Martian motioned him testily into silence. "I know. You're going to babble foolishness about

sunsets or something.

But what do you know of beauty? Have you ever known what it was to witness the beauty of the naked copper wires when an AC current is turned on? Have you sensed the delicate loveliness of induced currents set up in a solenoid when a magnet is passed through it? Have you ever attended a Martian pogrtwem?"

Garth Jan's eyes had grown misty with the thoughts he was conjuring up, and Fields stared in utter amazement. The shoe was on the other foot now and his sense of superiority left him of a sudden.

"Every race has its own attributes," he mumbled with a fatalism that had just a trace of hypocrisy in it, "but I see no reason why you should keep it such a blasted secret. We Earthmen have kept no secrets from your race."

"Don't accuse us of ingratitude," cried Garth Jan vehemently. According to the Martian code of ethics, ingratitude was the supreme vice, and at the insinuation of that Garth's caution left him. "We never act without reason, we Martians. And certainly it is not for our own sake that we hide this magnificent ability."

The Earthman smiled mockingly. He was on the trail of something-he felt it in his bones-and the only way to get it out was to tease it out.

"No doubt there is some nobility behind it all. It is a strange attribute of your race that you can always find some altruistic motive for your actions."

GARTH JAN bit his lip angrily "You have no right to say that." For a moment he thought of pleading worry over Fields' future peace of mind as a reason for silence, but the latter's mocking reference to "altruism" had rendered that impossible. A feeling of anger crept over him gradually and that forced him to his decision.

There was no mistaking the note of frigid unfriendliness that entered his voice.

"I'll explain by analogy." The Martian stared straight ahead of him as he spoke, eyes half-closed.

"You have told me that I live in a world that is composed merely of shades of light and dark. You try to describe a world of your own composed of infinite variety and beauty. I listen but care little concerning it. I have never known it and never can know it. One does not weep over the loss of what one has never owned.

"But-what if you were able to give me the ability to see color for five minutes? What if, for five minutes, I reveled in wonders undreamed of? What if, after those five minutes, I have to return it forever? Would those five minutes of paradise be worth a lifetime of regret afterwards-a lifetime of dissatisfaction because of my own shortcomings? Would it not have been the kinder act never to have

told me of color in the first place and so have removed its ever-present temptation?"

Fields had risen to his feet during the last part of the Martian's speech and his eyes opened wide in a wild surmise. "Do you mean an Earthman can possess the Martian sense if so desired?"

"For five minutes in a lifetime," Garth Jan's eyes grew dreamy, "and in those flve minutes sense-"

He came to a confused halt and glared angrily at his companion, "You know more than is good for you. See that you don't forget your promise."

He rose hastily and hobbled away as quickly as he could, leaning heavily upon the cane. Lincoln Fields made no move to stop him. He merely sat there and thought.

THE GREAT height of the cavern shrouded the roof in misty obscurity in which, at fixed intervals, there floated luminescent globes of radite. The air, heated by this subterranean volcanic stratum, wafted past gently. Before Lincoln Fields stretched the wide, paved avenue of the principal city of Mars, fading away into the distance.

He clumped awkwardly up to the entrance of the home of Garth Jan, the six-inch-thick layer of lead attached to each shoe a nuisance unending. Though it was still better than the uncontrollable bounding Earth muscles brought about in this lighter gravity.

The Martian was surprised to see his friend of six months ago but not altogether joyful. Fields was not slow to notice this but he merely smiled to himself. The opening formalities passed, the conventional remarks were made, and the two seated themselves.

Fields crushed the cigarette in the ash-tray and sat upright suddenly serious.

"I've come to ask for those five minutes you claim you can give me! May I have them?"

"Is that a rhetorical question? It certainly doesn't seem to require an answer."

Garth's tone was openly contemptuous.

The Earthman considered the other thoughtfully. "Do you mind if I outline my position in a few words?"

The Martian smiled indifferently. "It won't make any difference," he said.

"I'll take my chance on that. The situation is this: I've been born and reared in the lap of luxury and have been most disgustingly spoiled. I've never yet had a reasonable desire that I have not been able to fulfill, and I don't know what it means not to get what I want. Do you see?"

There was no answer and he continued, "I have found my happinese in beautiful sights, beautiful words, and beautiful sounds. I

have made a cult of beauty. In a word, I am an aesthete."

"Most interesting," the Martian's stony expression did not change a whit, "but what bearing has all this on the problem at hand?"

"Just this: You speak of a new form of beauty-a form unknown to me at present and entirely inconceivable even, but one which could be known if you so wished.

The notion attracts me. It more than attracts me-it makes its demands of me.

Again I remind you that when a notion begins to make demands of me, I yield-I always have."

"You are not the master in this case," reminded Garth Jan. "It is crude of me to remind you of this, but you cannot force me, you know. Your words, in fact, are almost offensive in their implications."

"I am glad you said that, for it allows me to be crude in my turn without offending my conscience."

Garth Jan's only reply to this was a self-confident grimace.

"I make my demand of you," said Fields, slowly, "in the name of gratitude."

"Gratitude?" the Martian started violently.

Fieids grinned broadly, "It's an appeal no honorable Martian can refuse-by your own ethics. You owe me gratitude, now, because it was through me you gained entrance into the houses of the greatest and most honorable men of Earth."

"I know that," Garth Jan flushed angrily. "You are impolite to remind me of it."

"I have no choice. You acknowledged the gratitude you owe me in actual words, back on Earth. I demand the chance to possess this mysterious sense you keep so secret-in the name of this acknowledged gratitude. Can you refuse now?"

"You know I can't," was the gloomy response. "I hesitated only for your own sake."

The Martian rose and held out his hand gravely, "You have me by the neck, Lincoln. It is done. Afterwards, though, I owe you nothing more. This will pay my debt of gratitude. Agreed?"

"Agreed!" The two shook hands and Lincoln Fields continued in an entirely different tone. "We're still friends, though, aren't we? This little altercation won't spoil things?"

"I hope not. Come! Join me at the evening meal and we can discuss the time and place of your-er-five minutes."

Lincoln Fields tried hard to down the faint nervousness that filled him as he waited in Garth Jan's private "concert"-room. He felt a sudden desire to laugh as the thought came to him that he felt exactly as he usually did in a dentist's waiting room.

He lit his tenth cigarette, puffed twice and threw it away, "You're

doing this very elaborately, Garth."

The Martian shrugged, "You have only five minutes so I might as well see to it that they are put to the best possible use. You're going to 'hear' part of a portwem which is to our sense what a great symphony (is that the word?) is to sound."

"Have we much longer to wait? The suspense, to be trite, is terrible."

"We're waiting for Novi Lon, who is to play the portwem, and for Done Vol, my private physician. They'll be along soon."

Fields wandered on to the low dais that occupied the center of the room and regarded the intricate mechanism thereupon with curious interest. The fore-part was encased in gleaming aluminum leaving exposed only seven tiers of shining black knobs above and five large white pedals below. Behind, however, it lay open and within there ran crossings and recrossings of fine wires in incredibly complicated paths.

"A curious thing, this," remarked the Earthman.

The Martian joined him on the dais, "It's an expensive instrument. It cost me ten thousand Martian credits."

"How does it work?"

"Not so differently from a Terrestrial piano. Each of the upper knobs controls a different electric circuit. Singly and together an expert portwem player could, by manipulating the knobs, form any conceivable pattern of electric current. The pedals below control the strength of the current."

Fields nodded absently and ran his fingers over the knobs at random. Idly, he noticed the small galvanometer located just above the keys kick violently each time he depressed a knob. Aside from that, he sensed nothing.

"Is the instrument really playing?"

The Martian smiled, "Yes, it is. And a set of unbelievably atrocious discords too."

He took a seat before the instrument and with a murmured "Here's how!" his fingers skimmed rapidly and accurately over the gleaming buttons.

The sound of a reedy Martian voice crying out in strident accents broke in upon him, and Garth Jan ceased in sudden embarrassment. "This is Novi Lon," he said hastily to Fields, "As usual he does not like my playing."

Fields rose to meet the newcomer. He was bent of shoulder and evidently of great age. A fine tracing of wrinkles, especially about eyes and mouth, covered his face.

"So this is the young Earthman," he cried, in strongly-accented English. "I disapprove your rashness but sympathize with your desire to attend a portwem. It is a great pity you can own our sense for no

more than five minutes. Without it no one can truly be said to live."

Garth Jan laughed, "He exaggerates, Lincoln. He's one of the greatest musicians of Mars, and thinks anyone doomed to damnation who would not rather attend a portwem than breathe." He hugged the older man warmly, "He was my teacher in my youth and many were the long hours in which he struggled to teach me the proper combinations of circuits."

"And I have failed after all, you dunce," snapped the old Martian. "I heard your attempt at playing as I entered. You still have not learned the proper fortgass combination. You were desecrating the soul of the great Bar Danin. My pupil!

Bah! It is a disgrace!"

The entrance of the third Martian Done Vol, prevented Novi Lon from continuing his tirade. Garth, glad of the reprieve, approached the physician hastily.

"Is all ready?"

"Yes," growled Vol surlily, "and a particularly uninteresting experiment this will be. We know all the results beforehand." His eyes fell upon the Earthman, whom he eyed contemptuously. "Is this the one who wishes to be inoculated?"

Lincoln Fields nodded eagerly and felt his throat and mouth go dry suddenly. He eyed the newcomer uncertainly and felt uneasy at the sight of a tiny bottle of clear liquid and a hypodermic which the physician had extracted from a case he was carrying.

"What are you going to do?" he demanded.

"He'll merely inoculate you. It'll take a second," Garth Jan assured him. "You see, the sense-organs in this case are several groups of cells in the cortex of the brain. They are activated by a hormone, a synthetic preparation of which is used to stimulate the dormant cells of the occasional Martian who is born-er- 'blind.' You'll receive the same treatment."

"Oh!-then Earthmen possess those cortex cells?"

"In a very rudimentary state. The concentrated hormone will activate them, but only for five minutes. After that time, they are literally blown out as a result of their unwonted activity. After that, they can't be re-activated under any circumstances."

Done Vol completed his last-minute preparations and approached Fields. Without a word, Fields extended his right arm and the hypodermic plunged in.

With the operation completed, the Terrestrial waited a moment or two and then essayed a shaky laugh, "I don't feel any change."

"You won't for about ten minutes," explained Garth. "It takes time. Just sit back and relax. Novi Lon has begun Bar Danin's 'Canals in the Desert'-it is my favorite-and when the hormone begins its work you

will find yourself in the very mid dle of things."

Now that the die was cast irrevocably, Fields found himself stonily calm. Novi I,on played furiously and Garth Jan, at the Earthman's right, was already lost in the composition. Even Done Vol, the fussy doctor, had forgotten his peevishness for the nonce.

Fields snickered under his breath. The Martians listened attentively but to him the room was devoid of sound and-almost-of all other sensation as well.

What-no, it was impossible, of course-but what if it were just an elaborate practical joke. He stirred uneasily and put the thought from his mind angrily.

The minutes passed; Novi Lon's fingers flew; Garth Jan's expression was one of unfeigned delight. Then Lincoln Fields blinked his eyes rapidly. For a moment a nimbus of color seemed to surround the musician and his instrument. He couldn't identify it-but it was there. It grew and spread until the room was full of it.

Other hues came to join it and still others. They wove and wavered; expanding and con tracting; changing with lightning speed and yet staying the same.

Intricate patterns of brilliant tints formed and faded, beating in silent bursts of color upon the young man's eyeballs.

Simultaneously, there came the impression of sound. From a whisper it rose into a glorious, ringing shout that wavered up and down the scale in quivering tremolos. He seemed to hear every instrument from fife to bass viol simultaneously, and yet, paradoxically, each rang in his ear in solitary clearness.

And together with this, there came the more subtle sensation of odor. From a suspicion, a mere trace, it waxed into a phantasmal field of flowers. Delicate spicy scents followed each other in ever stronger succession; in gentle wafts of pleasure.

Yet all this was nothing. Fields knew that. Somehow, he knew that what he saw, heard, and smelt were mere delusions-mirages of a brain that frantically attempted to interpret an entirely new conception in the old, familiar ways.

Gradually, the colors and the sounds and the scents died. His brain was beginning to realize that that which beat upon it was something hitherto unexperienced. The effect of the hormone became stronger, and suddenly-in one burst-Fields realized what it was he sensed.

He didn't see it-nor hear it-nor smell it-nor taste it-nor feel it. He knew what it was but he couldn't think of the word for it. Slowly, he realized that there wasn't any word for it. Even more slowly, he realized that there wasn't even any concept for it.

Yet he knew what it was.

There beat upon his brain something that consisted of pure waves of enjoyment-something that lifted him out of himself and pitched him headlong into a univeise unknown to him earlier. He was falling through an endless eternity of-something. It wasn't sound or sight but it was-something.

Something that enfolded him and hid his surroundings from him-that's what it was. It was endless and infinite in its variety and with each crashing wave, he glimpsed a farther horizon, and the wonderful cloak of sensation became thicker -and softer-and more beautiful.

Then came the discord. Like a little crack at first-marring a perfect beauty.

Then spreading and branching and growing wider, until, finally, it split apart thunderously-though without a sound.

Lincoln Fields, dazed and bewildered, found himself back in the concert room again.

He lurched to his feet and grasped Garth Jan by the arm violently, "Garth! Why did he stop? Tell him to continue! Tell him!"

Garth Jan's startled expression faded into pity, "He is still playing, Lincoln."

The Earthman's befuddled stare showed no signs of understanding. He gazed about him with unseeing eyes. Novi Lon's fingers sped across the keyboard as nimbly as ever; the expression on his face was as rapt as ever. Slowly, the truth seeped in, and the Earthman's empty eyes filled with horror.

He sat down, uttering one hoarse cry, and buried his head in his hands.

The five minutes had passed! There could be no return!

Garth Jan was smiling-a smile of dreadful malice, "I had pitied you just a moment ago, Lincoln, but now I'm glad-glad! You forced this out of me-you made me do this. I hope you're satisfied, because I certainly am. For the rest of your life," his voice sank to a sibilant whisper, "you'll remember these five minutes and know what it is you're missing-what it is you can never have again.

You are blind, Lincoln,-blind!"

The Earthman raised a haggard face and grinned, but it was no more than a horrible baring of the teeth. It took every ounce of will-power he possessed to maintain an air of composure.

He did not trust himself to speak. With wavering step, he marched out of the room, head held high to the end.

And within, that tiny, bitter voice, repeating over and over again, "You entered a normal man! You leave blind-blind-BLIND."